

Gender-Fair Lexicon: From Biased to Inclusive Language

Avegail T. Temporal

School of Graduate Studies and Research, University of Saint Anthony, Philippines

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Abstract— Despite policy frameworks mandating gender equality in Philippine education, masculine-centric linguistic defaults persist in classrooms. This study assessed Senior High School students' awareness of Gender-Fair Language (GFL), their attitudes toward its classroom use, its perceived impact on inclusive culture, and the interventions needed to support a Gender-Fair Language Lexicon at Colegio de San Rafael Arcangel, Inc. A quantitative design was employed using random sampling; a researcher-developed, expert-validated sixty-item Likert-scale survey was administered and analyzed through mean, standard deviation, and rank. Findings reveal that students are Moderately Aware of Gender-Fair Language and hold a Somewhat Positive attitude toward its use, strongest for institutionalized occupational substitutions and weakest for non-binary honorifics. Attitudinal endorsement was strong at the normative level but inconsistent in habitual application. The study concludes that the school community exists in a state of "passive readiness" — adequate cognitive understanding without the structural mechanisms for consistent practice. In response, *In Fairness: A Lexicon for Inclusive Communication* was developed as a localized, faith-aligned instructional resource.

Keywords— Catholic education, gender-fair language, inclusive communication, lexicon, linguistic recalibration



I. INTRODUCTION

Language is the primary medium through which human beings organize social reality, transmit cultural values, and construct systems of meaning. Gender-fair language (GFL) — also called inclusive or non-sexist language — refers to linguistic practices that avoid bias and stereotyping, representing all persons with equal dignity and respect (Mills, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). The movement to standardize GFL gained momentum during the mid-twentieth century, driven by Second-Wave Feminism and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which argued that language actively constructs human consciousness and social perception.

In the Philippine context, Republic Act 7192 (1992), Civil Service Commission Memorandum Circular No. 12 (2005), and DepEd Order No. 32 (2017) laid the institutional groundwork for inclusive language in education. Despite these mandates, a persistent gap remains between policy and actual classroom practice. This gap is particularly significant at Colegio de San

Rafael Arcangel, Inc. (CSRA), a member of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP), which upholds the JEEPGY framework — Justice and Peace, Ecological Integrity, Engaged Citizenship, Poverty Alleviation, Gender Equality, and Youth Empowerment. Empirical data on how Senior High School students internalize Gender-fair language in daily practice remain scarce, creating an urgent need for locally grounded research and instructional tools.

The study is anchored on four interdisciplinary theories synthesized into the Theory of Linguistic Recalibration (Temporal, 2026). Linguistic Relativity (Sapir-Whorf) establishes that biased language creates "cognitive invisibility," making it difficult to conceptualize women or non-binary persons in leadership roles (Lange, 2025). Gender Schema Theory (Bem, 1981) explains how inclusive language acts as a "schema disruptor," breaking automatic gendered associations (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021). Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) posits that students adopt GFL through observational learning

from teachers. Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973) explains how institutional standard-setting drives widespread Gender-fair language adoption. Together, these frameworks reveal that linguistic change is simultaneously cognitive, behavioral, and social.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

Language both reflects and reinforces social hierarchies, particularly those rooted in gender. Historically, 18th-century grammarians institutionalized the "generic he" and male-as-default conventions, rendering women linguistically invisible (Mills, 2020; UNESCO, 2022). Gender-fair language (GFL) seeks to dismantle these structures through neutral alternatives, as research confirms that masculine generics distort mental imagery and constrain learners' perceptions of gender diversity in professional and leadership roles (Lange, 2025; Silveira, 2022).

The cognitive basis for GFL reform is rooted in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which holds that language shapes perception, producing "cognitive invisibility" in masculine-default environments (Lange, 2025). Gender Schema Theory further explains how gendered linguistic cues become internalized as mental frameworks, while Morgenroth and Ryan (2021) establish that sustained exposure to inclusive vocabulary disrupts these schemas and fosters more equitable cognitive patterns. At the behavioral level, Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory confirms that students adopt inclusive language primarily through teacher modeling, yet inconsistent faculty application persists across Philippine schools due to limited training and the absence of standardized resources (EPRAJ, 2025; Tarrayo, 2022).

In the local context, Tarrayo (2022, 2023) found that GFL challenges gender asymmetry in Philippine higher education, while Mendoza et al. (2024) noted that most existing learning materials default to masculine language. Within Catholic institutions, framing Gender-fair language within human dignity frameworks significantly increases acceptance among students and faculty (Fernandez, 2021; Medeiros, 2021) — an approach consistent with CEAP's JEEPGY framework, which positions Gender Equality as a core pillar of Catholic formation and provides the institutional grounding for inclusive communication as an expression of faith.

III. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research design was employed. Respondents were 187 Senior High School students from

STEM, GAS, ABM, and HUMSS strands at CSRA, San Antonio, Pili, Camarines Sur, selected through proportional random sampling using Slovin's Formula. A researcher-developed, expert-validated sixty-item Likert-scale survey instrument was distributed across three thematic sections: Awareness, Perceptions and Attitudes, and Perceived Impact of Gender-fair language. Data were analyzed through mean, standard deviation, and rank. The study was conducted during the Second Semester of Academic Year 2025–2026.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Level of Awareness

Students demonstrated a Moderately Aware level of GFL ($M = 4.178$, $SD = 0.820$), indicating adequate but not yet mastery-level understanding. Five indicators reached Extremely Aware status, all involving institutionalized occupational substitutions: 'Police Officer' for 'Policeman' ($M = 4.299$), 'Chairperson' for 'Chairman' ($M = 4.241$), and 'Firefighter' for 'Fireman' ($M = 4.230$). Awareness was weakest for non-binary honorifics ('Mx.', $M = 4.070$), the singular 'they' ($M = 4.080$), and 'Manufactured/Synthetic' for 'Man-made' ($M = 4.080$) — forms with the least institutional exposure.

This bifurcation confirms that Gender-fair language awareness is proportional to the degree of institutional normalization. The statistical equivalence between policy-level awareness and active linguistic detection (both $M = 4.128$) further establishes that policy exposure alone does not generate application-ready competence.

3.2 Perceptions and Attitudes

Students hold a Somewhat Positive overall disposition toward Gender-fair language ($M = 4.186$, $SD = 0.746$). Eight indicators reached Very Positive status, concentrated in normative and ethical endorsement: the belief that GFL should be universally practiced by teachers and students ($M = 4.513$), that it reflects genuine commitment to diversity and dignity ($M = 4.213$), and that it is consistent with Catholic values of human dignity ($M = 4.438$). The lowest mean was recorded for the singular 'they/them' as a classroom referent ($M = 3.978$) — the only indicator below 4.00 — suggesting attitudinal reservation toward non-binary linguistic forms.

Teacher role-modeling ($M = 4.165$) and practical ease of application ($M = 4.144$) both fell within the Somewhat Positive range, identifying the gap between attitudinal endorsement and consistent behavioral application as the primary structural concern.

3.3 Perceived Impact on Inclusive Culture

Students perceive GFL's impact as Somewhat Positive ($M = 4.178$, $SD = 0.820$). The five Very Positive Impact indicators were concentrated in institutional dimensions: consistent GFL use fostering mutual respect ($M = 4.358$), and the availability of a Gender-fair Lexicon deepening awareness ($M = 4.299$). The weakest perceived impact was for inclusive language in textbooks and learning materials ($M = 4.070$, $SD = 0.880$), identifying curricular materials as the primary structural gap.

The convergent pattern across all three dimensions — Moderately Aware ($M = 4.178$), Somewhat Positive attitudes ($M = 4.186$), and Somewhat Positive Impact ($M = 4.178$) — confirms that structural barriers, not cognitive or attitudinal resistance, constitute the primary obstacle to consistently integrated Gender-fair language practice.

V. CONCLUSION

This study establishes that CSRA Senior High School students possess genuine but moderate Gender-fair language awareness, favorable attitudinal dispositions, and a recognition of Gender-fair language's institutional benefits — yet remain in a state of "passive readiness" due to the absence of formalized linguistic resources, inconsistent faculty role-modeling, and lack of uniform policy standards. The primary barriers are structural, not motivational.

In response, *In Fairness: A Lexicon for Inclusive Communication* was developed as a localized, faith-aligned instructional tool organized across five domains: professional titles, universal terms, pronouns and honorifics, collective nouns, and relational language. It serves not as a prescriptive correction of speech but as a cognitive scaffold — a schema disruptor that makes inclusive communication a natural institutional standard rather than an effortful exception (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021).

Complementary institutional interventions are proposed: (1) formal integration of GFL standards into all official school documents; (2) structured faculty capacity-building programs including orientation, guided practice, and peer observation; and (3) a student-led GFL Advocacy Committee embedded in existing student government structures. These interventions are grounded in Republic Acts 7192 and 9710 and operationalize CEAP's JEEPGY Gender Equality pillar.

The advantage of this study lies in its empirical grounding and its provision of a ready-to-implement institutional resource. Its primary limitation is its single-institution, student-only scope. Future research should

extend to faculty perspectives, cross-institutional comparisons, and longitudinal evaluation of lexicon effectiveness post-implementation.

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